



# What Drives Far-Right Terrorism in the United States?

James A. Piazza

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## Far-right terrorism has re-emerged as a serious security issue in the United States. What are the drivers behind this phenomenon?

The recent violence in Charlottesville Virginia, perpetrated by white supremacists and neo-Nazis that had gathered for a “Unite the Right” rally, has refocused attention on right-wing terrorism in the United States. During the rally, James Alex Fields Jr., a [possible neo-Nazi sympathizer](#), drove a car into a crowd of counter-demonstrators, killing one person and seriously wounding 19 others. The car attack has been described by U.S. Attorney General Jeff Sessions and Republican and Democratic elected officials alike as an (alleged) act of right-wing [domestic terrorism](#), and the U.S. Justice Department has promised to open an official civil rights investigation of the incident.

What are the macro-causes of domestic right-wing terrorism in the United States? In a [published study](#), I attempted to address this question by statistically evaluating all identifiable “right-wing” terrorist attacks in the United States for the period 1970 to 2011. My goal was to try to determine the economic, social and political factors that drive right-wing terrorism. In the study, terrorism is defined as an act of premeditated political violence perpetrated by nongovernment organizations intended to influence a wider audience. I identified domestic terrorist incidents as “right-wing” if they were perpetrated by groups or individuals that were motivated by racist, white supremacist, antiabortion and violent, extreme antigovernment ideologies.

It is important to distinguish the events in my analysis from hate crimes, which are spontaneous rather than premeditated or strategically-calculated acts, and from legal, nonviolent far-right political activities. The groups and individuals in

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the analysis are outside of mainstream politics in the United States and have deliberately adopted the use of violence to achieve their goals, rather than nonviolent political strategies such as voting, lobbying and forming protest movements.

### **The drivers of US far-right terrorism**

It does not seem that right-wing terrorism is driven by economic grievances or distress. Across the board, socioeconomic factors that are commonly argued to produce resentments that fuel right-wing terrorism were not significant. For example, right-wing terrorism is not more likely to occur in U.S. states that have a larger percentage of their populations below the poverty line or that have higher levels of unemployment or income inequality. I specifically examined two economic factors commonly argued by scholars to be associated with the rise of violent right-wing extremism: the structural decline of blue-collar manufacturing and the “Farm Crisis” that took hold of the United States in the 1980s. Both of these are said to have produced strong resentments that violent right-wing groups exploited to garner recruits, thereby becoming more active and dangerous. Neither of these factors, however, do a good job predicting when and where right-wing terrorism occurs in the United States.

States that have suffered heavy industrial manufacturing job losses in a given year or a decline in family farms due to foreclosure do not disproportionately experience right-wing terrorism. The apparent lack of a direct relationship between economic distress in the United States and right-wing terrorism mirrors findings for terrorism writ-large, globally. Other [studies](#) of economically-aggrieved countries or individuals have not found them to be more terrorism-prone.

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I also examined a series of social factors. The propaganda of right-wing extremist groups often mentions immigration, growing ethnic diversity and the decline of white demographic dominance in the United States as motivating threats. Far-right protestors in Charlottesville illustrated this by chanting “You Will Not Replace Us!” and “Blood and Soil!” However, I did not find actual racial and ethnic diversity on the ground to be a statistically significant driver of right-wing terrorism.

Nationwide, the increase in the nonwhite population, and the growth of the nonwhite Hispanic or Latino population, in the United States, bears little relation with ebbs and flows of right-wing terrorist attacks. Similarly, states with rapidly growing nonwhite population were not found to experience more right-wing attacks. This does not foreclose the possibility that growing ethnic diversity in the U.S. is a driver of right-wing terrorism. However, it is possible that the perceived rather than actual threat of demographic change and growing diversity fuels violent extremism. This effect might be better revealed by a study of individual attitudes as drivers of terrorism.

Related to fears among violent right-wing extremists that whites are being “replaced” by nonwhite immigrants and others is the belief among extremists that traditional male roles have been undermined by the empowerment and enhanced personal autonomy of women in contemporary America. I investigated this by testing two measures of women’s status: the national rate of female participation in the workforce and the rate at which women seek abortions. Both of these are frequently-used measures of actual women’s empowerment and are also potent political and cultural symbols of women’s equality. I find both to be associated with a significant increase in right-wing terrorism.

Holding constant other factors such as past experience of right-wing terrorism at the state level, unemployment, income, population, urbanization, size and growth of the economy and region of the country, I found that for each five percent increase in women's employment nationally, the U.S. states experienced a 50 percent increase in rates of domestic right-wing terrorist attacks. Similarly, for every increase of 10 medical abortions per 10,000 live births, a state experienced a 24 percent increase in right-wing terrorist attacks. Of course it is possible that this latter abortion rate finding is simply reflecting abortion clinics being targeted by anti-abortion extremists. However, when I removed attacks on abortion clinics from the data, the abortion rate in a state still is a statistically significant predictor of terrorism. This suggests that the controversy of abortion itself is a driver of all types of right-wing terrorism.

Figures 1 and 2 help to illustrate these effects.

### **Figure 1. Impact of Women's Employment on Right-Wing Terrorism**

### **Figure 2. Impact of Abortion Rates on Right-Wing Terrorism**

Finally, I considered some political and policy factors that have been hypothesized to drive right-wing terrorism. There are several schools of thought on the impact that partisan control of government might have on violent right-wing extremism. One holds that when Republicans win elections and hold

public offices, violent far-right extremists increase their activities because they feel emboldened.

The other school argues that Democratic Party control, and policies that Democratic politicians frequently seek to enact such as gun control or enhanced social policies that increase the size of the federal government, antagonizes right-wing extremists, prompting them to strike back by launching terrorist attacks. I tested for both and found that right-wing terrorist attacks were more common when a Democrat controlled the White House, and increased dramatically after the elections of both Bill Clinton and Barack Obama.

In fact, Democratic control over the White House increases right-wing attacks by almost 73 percent. Figure 3 presents the different projected rates of right-wing terrorism under Democratic versus Republican presidencies. The partisan effect, however, seems limited to national politics. Partisan control over state government does not significantly affect patterns of right-wing terrorism.

### **Figure 3. Predicted Right-Wing Terrorism Under Democratic and Republican Presidencies**

This particular finding is interesting given the [argument](#) that U.S. President Trump has emboldened right-wing extremists through his [rhetoric](#) and his [policies](#) and [policy proposals](#). However, the impact of the Trump presidency cannot be assessed by the study as the analysis does not cover terrorism after 2011. The [data](#) I used to conduct the original analysis has not yet been

updated through 2017, when Trump assumed office. It will be critical to retest the role of partisan control over the White House once this data is available.

While who controls the White House is found to affect patterns of right-wing terrorism, the national partisan effect seems to not be linked to specific federal government policies. Policies such as increases in federal income taxes or the 1994 federal ban on the sale assault weapons – both of which were an anathema for right-wing extremists – are not statistically significant predictors of attacks.

## **Conclusion**

The sum of these findings is that several of the more symbolic factors, such as reaction against the empowerment of women or control over the government by an ideological “enemy,” that are significant drivers of terrorism rather than structural economic factors, demographic change or government policies enacted. This finding is, perhaps, not so surprising. On a general level, symbolic issues are frequently important motivators for terrorists world-wide. Consider, for example, the symbolic importance of cleansing Muslim society from the influence of Western culture for a movement like Boko Haram in Nigeria or reconstructing an imagined Caliphate for the Islamic State (ISIL) movement. More specific to the phenomenon of right-wing terrorism, the results underscore the potency of the U.S. President as a (singular) symbol of government and political direction of the country as well as the cultural impact of changing women’s statuses.

It is also important to consider that the study is very much a preliminary investigation into the drivers of domestic right-wing terrorism. The study focused on the most basic structural factors that precipitate right-wing

terrorism. Future research might look beyond structural precipitants to examine factors that facilitate the motivation, planning and execution of right-wing terrorist attacks, such as the role played by social media, hate speech online, etc.

**Author's Note:** *Graphs of marginal effects of a 5-unit change (Women's Employment), 10-unit change (Abortion Rates) and 1-unit change (Republican to Democrat) on counts of right-wing terrorist events. In models, state unemployment rate, inequality, population, population growth, urbanization rate, area, gross state product per capita, growth of gross state product per capita, region (Midwest, South, West) and previous year right-wing attacks are controlled for.*

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Image of James Alex Fields, Jr., who conducted the Charlottesville car attack.  
Image credit: [Rodney Dunning/Flickr](#).

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**James A. Piazza is Liberal Arts Research Professor of Political Science at the Pennsylvania State University. Piazza's research focuses on terrorism, counterterrorism, political violence and intra-state armed conflict. His published work has appeared in the American Journal of Political Science, the Journal of Politics, International Organization, Comparative Political Studies, International Studies Quarterly, Journal of Conflict Resolution, Public Choice, Journal of Peace Research, Political Psychology, Conflict Management and Peace Science, Political Research Quarterly, Foreign Policy Analysis, International Interactions, Defence and Peace Economics, Southern Economic Journal, Security Studies, Terrorism and Political**



**Violence and Studies in Conflict and Terrorism. He can be contacted at [jap45@psu.edu](mailto:jap45@psu.edu). His website: <http://polisci.la.psu.edu/people/jap45>**

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